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A SAFE PLACE TO BE

by

Eileen Clarke

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

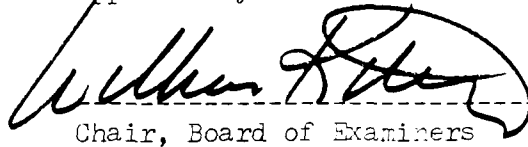
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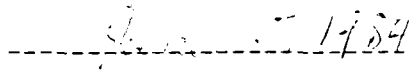
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1984

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A SAFE PLACE TO BE

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for Cece and Mike



## GRANDMA JELLO

From the kitchen, Josie hears her mother get out of bed. "Ma. You're not supposed to get out of bed yet. You know what the doctor says. Not for another week." Josie's head ducks back into the kitchen. She puts the apron on and pulls it over her breasts, brushing the lint away, tying it in back. As a child, she thought things would be different, now, for her. Her own home, her body, that gesture of brushing the lint off her stomach, from when she was a child and thought her body would naturally and undeniably change. But her stomach is still flat, even without the girdle she slides over her hips every morning. All the beauty and care wasted. Again she calls out to her mother, "You use the pan like the doctor says, Ma. That's what I got you the bell for."

Mrs. Valenti wrinkles her nose. "Claire be here," she says.

"Claire, Claire. You worry more about that little girl than you worry about yourself. Ma. Comeon. . . ."

"Basta, basta," the old woman waves her away.

"You treat her like she's a princess," Josie says. "Like she's a Grace Kelly in a silver gown. What are you gonna do when she has babies, Ma? Go to her little house on the Island and change her

babies for her?"

"I would still do it for you, as well, Josephina."

Josie wipes her hands on the skirt of her apron. "This is not good for you, Ma, running around the apartment."

Mrs. Valenti stops at the dresser and kneels before the tiny altar. The picture of the Virgin, her dead husband, Biajio, the votive candle sit on the left side of the dresser. Above them, a wooden crucifix, with three palm fronds threaded between the shoulders of the carved Jesus and the cross. Josie knows she can't hurry her mother--has never been able to hurry her mother--but she can't stop trying now. She stuffs her hands down into her apron pockets as Claire knocks at the door.

"Go," Mrs. Valenti says. "Let Claire in."

"She can wait, Ma." Josie walks to the foot of the bed and sits. If she must wait for her mother, then Claire can wait as well. In the mirror across the room, Josie looks at her hair absently. It's her mother she's really watching though, every movement of her hands, watching for her breath. "Stupid," she says to herself. "Stupid. The doctors. To do nothing. They have so much new for children. Penicillin. The Salk vaccine. But what do they do for the bad heart? They send the old people home to die. Stupide." Josie combs through her pompadour and resets the comb above her left ear. The girl knocks again.

"I'm not dead yet. Now let her in, Josie!"

"When you're back in bed, Ma."

"Who do you suppose will catch the bouquet?"

Josie's mouth bristles with pins as she pulls the skirt into the bodice, one hand holding it above Claire's slim hips.

"I mean, since I'm a member of the wedding, I could catch it?"

"Claire turn around for me . . . comeon Baby, you got to pay attention."

Claire rolls her eyes and wonders if Josie will ever consider her grown up, but pirouettes a quarter turn on the hassock. At ten and a half, she thinks to herself, I am taller than Josie, taller than my mother.

Josie nudges the large, hinged mirror open a bit to see her mother better. She looks up from the satin and net, to the mirror, the reflection of Mrs. Valenti sleeping in her high, mahogany bed. She listens for her mother's snoring, then looks back down again.

With skill and years of practice, she speaks even with the pins in her mouth. "Claire, you're going to walk down that aisle in a slip if you don't pay attention to me. Now turn around. No, not that much. There, now hold still. I'll get this layer pinned, then you can take a break for a few minutes while I sew it in."

Josie takes the dressmaker pins one at a time from between her lips. Her lips purse toward her finger tips--like fish kissing, Claire thinks to herself.

"It's a very pretty dress. You'll look very grown up at your Aunt Margie's wedding, dressed like all the other girls. And someday, you'll wear it to a party for your boyfriend, yes?"

"Josie? Do you think my mother would let me wear lipstick at the wedding?"

"You girls," she laughs, and pulls the bodice down. "Put your

shoulders down. I still have halfway to go. Here, turn a little more, Baby" and she continues pinning.

Claire sighs. "Do you?"

"What?"

"Lipstick?"

"You know, you wear lipstick thirty years like me, your lips get pale, makes you sick-looking and you have to wear it or nobody decent looks at you. Here, turn around all the way. And put your hands down. You bite your fingernails when you're grown up, you'll get lipstick all over them."

Claire sucks in her breath, pulling her ribs and chest away from the scratchy netting. "Thirty years. Then you were fourteen when you started wearing lipstick?"

"Just hold still, won't you?"

Just under the window, Claire knows, three floors down, the sidewalk curves downhill. If she were out, if only she were skating down that hill in her soft orange jeans and a cotton shirt, her skate key around her neck. Claire looks out the window to see if the lights are on below, if she would already have to be in anyway, and across the street in the other building, a boy walks to his desk and turns on a lamp.

"Josie? Do you think Aunt Margie will move away now?"

"Sure. Of course, those things happen. Buying a house, having kids. Put your hands down, Claire. I have only a little more."

"High heels," the girl says, as if suddenly discovering them on her list.

"No! You're already taller than your aunt. And Maureen. And

Katey. Besides, the skirt is already cut. If you wear high heels, your hem lines won't match."

"But. . . ."

"Just be glad you're going to be in the wedding at all. Junior Bridesmaid! They couldn't even fit you down at the store like the other girls."

"That's because Maureen and Katey were wearing padded bras."

"Claire hold still!"

"I . . . the pins stick me. My skin feels itchy all over, and red every night when I take the dress off."

"Delicate, delicate . . ." Josie starts to answer, but hears her mother's bed squeak behind her. She looks in the mirror and sees her mother laughing.

"Josie, enough," she says.

"Ma, I got just a little more."

"Let her go," the old woman says, shifting her weight again. "Let her down. I'm hungry."

"Ma. Another five minutes. I'm almost done here."

"Basta! Basta! I'm tired, now, and hungry."

Josie takes the pins from her mouth, reminds Claire not to sit, and retreats to the kitchen. Claire hears the oven door slip from Josie's fingers and pop against the hinge. There are pins pressing into her, and Claire pulls at the bodice to move them away from her skin.

"Come," Mrs. Valenti says, beckoning with her right hand. She smooths the covers. "Sit," she says.

"But Josie said. . . ."

"You sit careful, I know. You're a good girl."

Claire lifts her crinolines, petticoat, and three layers of satin and net above her waist, and sits on her cotton slip.

The old woman clears her throat. She leans forward, drawing a box wrapped in pink paper, from under the pile of pillows.

Claire blushes and tries to refuse the gift, but the old woman insists.

"For you. You old enough now. Wear it tomorrow, and the pins not hurt so much."

Still Claire hesitates. It looks like a little girl's birthday present, with pink curly ribbon and little faces on the paper.

"Open it. Take it home and open it. Tomorrow Saturday. You come early and show me you like it."

The next day Claire comes early, and waits for Mrs. Valenti to answer the door. This will be a good time for them, before Josie comes. Claire shakes the present again, the first time since she left her own bedroom. She presses it against her ear, perhaps a watch, then shakes it again but hears nothing. And as she hears Mrs. Valenti turn the knob, she squeezes it in the center. Mrs. Valenti opens the door and leads Claire into the kitchen, showing her how well she can walk today. Claire sets the present down.

"You remember when you come with Jeanne?"

"Yes. Lots of times. And you made Jello for us to drink."

"We make now. Your grandma, she make you Jello?"

"Yes. But she never makes it like you do."

"Easy. You tell her, 'Don't put in the cold water, Grandma,' and

drink it fast, right away." Mrs. Valenti leans against the counter.

Claire follows instructions, boils the water, pours it into the pitcher and begins stirring the crystals into the water.

"I think, sometimes, Josie doesn't like me."

"Here, more hot water." Mrs. Valenti leans over the pitcher. "She used to be just like you. Little girl can't hold still, always asking questions."

"I don't," Claire objects. She's quiet. And good. It's the pins that stick into her skin, and the net scratching, and the light in the window across the street. That boy, what he's doing is so much more interesting and Claire has many, many more important things to do than fit into a dress every night. Mrs. Valenti shushes her with one finger.

"Just like you. Just like. She look out the window and make daydreams. But she grow up, and make no more make-believe. She worry all the time," Mrs. Valenti nods her head with each word. "She afraid I gonna die. She afraid the world gonna die--BOOM." She pauses. "Just like you don't call me Grandma Jello no more." She throws up one hand, scattering the lint and dust hanging in the sunlight. Mrs. Valenti leans against the counter, looking into the pitcher Claire is stirring with a large wooden spoon. There are red crystals on the spoon.

"Enough. Basta." She touches Claire's elbow with a swollen finger. "You remember what I say. Be nice. Hold still."

"But that net itches and sometimes the pins stick me." Claire hangs the spoon over the pitcher to drip.

"Basta! Basta! You listen. You make daydreams, but you listen. Now. Bring the tray and I get back in bed before Josie come. And

bring my present box."

The parquet floors are golden and Claire runs her toes, first horizontally and then vertically along the lines.

"There's a boy over there who doesn't close his drapes," she says, pointing with the snack tray toward the bedroom window.

Mrs. Valenti gestures toward her glasses. "Can't see that far," she says. She raises one leg and with the other foot pushes herself up on the bed. She takes two breaths before rolling, with one movement, onto her back. She burps. "Scusee," she says, and points to the tray Claire is holding. "Is he pretty boy?"

Claire blushes and puts the tray down across Mrs. Valenti's legs. "I don't know. I can't see that far."

"Look. Go look."

"No. It's not nighttime. I can't see him now."

"So. That's why you don't turn when Josie tell you."

Claire nods. "But he doesn't see me. Not when I'm on the hassock or when I'm changing. He only looks the other way."

Mrs. Valenti drinks her cherry Jello and watches Claire's face. They are both quiet. For a while, the sun's rays shorten on the bedroom floor, crawling up the wooden frame of the mirror, and then fade into indistinct shadows. Claire opens the box Mrs. Valenti gave her. And slowly, her fingers draw out the present inside--soft glittery material--a slip. She sets the box down, removes her orange jeans and polo shirt, and pulls the slip on over her head. She presses her hand against the slippery pink. "It kinda catches, too," she says, and Mrs. Valenti nods.



"It's quiet. It don't make the noise when you walk. Not like the taffeta Josie wears."

Barefoot, Claire walks to the three-panelled mirror and opens it wide. The work light is off still, and only the dim votive candle in the room behind her, casting deep shadows, picks up the glow of silk and perspiration from Claire's skin.

"The lipstick," she remembers.

"I get," and Mrs. Valenti shakes the plastic tube out of the gift box. Persimmon, the tiny circular label on the bottom says.

"Where . . . how did you get it?"

"Josie give to me," she laughs and pulls the girl closer. "What I gonna do with persimmon? A fat old lady. Bend closer to me, Claire." Claire starts to purse her lips as she has seen her mother and Josie do.

"No. Make flat, your lips . . ." Mrs. Valenti says. "Good. Good. Now . . ." and she lightly touches Claire's lips, leaving spots of color. "Good. Good. Now look how pretty."

Claire looks closely in the mirror, steps back and twirls slowly in the candlelight.

"It fits you nice, Claire."

"I love it."

They hear the key in the door, then Josie's "Ma, I'm back." Her high heels clack across the parquet floor into the kitchen, paper sacks crinkle and drop to the table. Then the clacking again, the rustle of her coat as she slips it onto a hanger. The closet door clicks shut.

"Sorry I took so long, Ma. You want something to eat?"

"I got. Claire fix for me."

"What? The Jello? You should eat more than that. Comeon, I'll fix you a nice cup of tea. And Claire," she says, entering the room, "come away from that window. You're not decent." Josie straightens her father's picture on the dresser, turns on the work light, and goes back to the kitchen.

"Come." Mrs. Valenti gestures for Claire to sit on the bed.

"Come. Sit here and drink. That's the secret, you know, you got to drink it fast or it make solid." As Claire drinks, the old woman pats the blanket down around her legs.

The boy leans over his desk. He is tall and lean--even from across the street Claire can tell: every time he comes into his room he does three chin-ups on the door frame, and he doesn't stretch to reach. Jeanne's brother is fourteen and he isn't that tall.

" . . . finish this dress tonight. Claire, are you listening to me?"

"Uh huh," she nods.

"Don't mumble. Now turn around. I need to finish pinning this cummerbund around the waist. Then you can take a break while I sew it."

Claire nods and turns. There is nothing to look at now but herself standing on the hassock in the mirror. There are three Claires, though, one on each panel of the hinged mirror. Three mirrors. But if she makes a face in this one, as she'd like to, Josie can see her on the left. If she keeps Josie in her peripheral vision, Claire can hear the rustle of her dress before she looks up.

"Breathe in, Claire." Josie pulls the cummerbund snug. "Turn."

Claire imagines herself dancing at the wedding, in the layers of satin and net, with the pink slip under all, the sound she will make, moving, taller than any other girl at the wedding. And only Susan Wagner is taller in the whole school, and heavier and starting to get breasts because of it.

"Hold your breath, Claire."

"Hmmm?"

"Breathe in and hold it."

Claire nods and takes a breath.

Josie pins the pink sash to both sides of the zipper allowance, then stands and straightens her own skirt.

Claire frowns. "It's too tight," she says, and pulls at the sides of the sash.

"Don't!" Josie slaps her hands. "Now you get down and take the dress off."

"But it's too tight."

"Don't argue with me!" Josie walks over to the iron and turns it on.

"But it's not comfortable."

"You want to grow up? You want to wear lipstick, you want to paint your face? Wearing a dress like this isn't like wearing one of your polo shirts. You got to learn. A dress like this is not made for playing in the playground."

Claire thinks to herself: I know that already, that's obvious. But Josie is not paying any attention to what I want. Not to the

lipstick, or not wanting to be called "Baby." And not wanting the dress to be so snug.

Josie checks the setting on the iron. She looks up at Claire, but Mrs. Valenti rolls over, grunting in her sleep, and they both stand quietly and watch her. When she settles down again, Josie tests the iron with a drop of water. It spits and disappears.

"I'm tired, Baby. Take the dress off. We'll see how it fits after I sew it in."

Mrs. Valenti has gone to the bathroom, again refusing to use the bell and pan. They wait for her to return to bed, the iron poised and waiting for the final measurement of the hem. Josie zips the dress up in back, and points Claire at the mirror. She walks stiffly at first, then turns once and, after fluffing the skirt out of the way, sits on the hassock. The old leather crackles against the back of Claire's legs.

Josie gestures for Claire to stand up. "It looks nice."

"It's still too tight," Claire says, feeling a tear start. "I won't be able to breathe or eat or anything."

"Claire! Don't whine!"

"I just don't want . . . ." She pauses.

"What, Baby?"

Claire sees that her toes are all curled up and she stretches them out. She wipes at her cheek. "I'm not a baby."

"You're standing there in a grown dress and you're crying. What do you want?"

"I just don't want it tight."

"I tell you, Claire, this is the way grown up dresses are supposed to be. You say you want to be so grown up, wear lipstick, high heels. . . ."

"My Mom's dresses aren't this tight."

"Your mother isn't ten years old. It's different after you have babies."

"Well, so lots of girls in my school wear high heels and nail polish to dances and they're not any older than me!"

"They look cheap. You want to look like them?"

"No! They don't — look — "

"They got nothin' on their minds but boys. And then they're gonna have to get married. Is that what you want?"

"I'm not a baby! And I'm not thinking — about boys — all the time!"

"No. Not all the time. The rest of the time you're ogling yourself in the mirror, and running around naked, imagining God knows what!"

"No! No! I never — imagine — anything!"

"You get the big stomach!"

"I promise — "

From behind them, the old woman's voice: "Josie, what's the matter?"

"It's okay, Ma. It's nothing. Go back to sleep."

"No. I hear something."

"It was nothing, Ma. Go back to sleep."

Mrs. Valenti looks at Claire standing with her back to the mirror. She is so close to the glass, so frightened, with one hand on the outside edge of the frame, that it looks like she will close herself inside it and disappear. Mrs. Valenti calls to her, but she looks only at Josie.

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"I never — thought — bad — "

"Josie, say you sorry."

"No, Ma. No!" She steps back as if struck in the face.

Mrs. Valenti chest heaves with each breath and she lays her hand across her breast to help the words come. "Say you sorry, now."

"No, Ma. You got no sense what goes on. Filling this little girl with make-believe--she's got no way to figure out what's true from what you tell her."

"Josie!"

"Today I come, and you got her parading around in front of the window in her underwear! No, Ma. I don't apologize. You're old. You don't know nothin'." She starts to pick up the tray beside the bed.

"Why you keep telling her . . . ."

"Tell her what? Josie? What I tell Claire I didn't tell you?"

Josie's hands whiten on the lip of the tray. The glasses rattle against each other and when Josie turns from her mother the glasses fall and the last drops of red Jello, cooler and gelled, cling to the bottom of the glass. Josie stops in the doorway and faces her mother.

"Nothin', Ma. You don't know nothin'! Forget it."

"Josie!"

"No, Ma. I won't listen to anything more you got to say." She turns and walks out to the kitchen.

There is a pile of loose pins on the sewing machine. Josie sorts through them for the broken and bent ones and sweeps them into the trash.

"I'd like to stay a little longer, if it's okay?"

"Why?"

"Just because . . . I like your mother."

Josie brushes the lint from her fingers and clasps her hands in her lap. "You want a lot of things today, Claire."

Claire waits for Josie's answer, but she only looks into the shade of the work lamp. Claire starts to ask again.

"Call your father and see if he can come for you. I'm too tired to walk you home tonight," Josie says. "There's no more fitting, you know."

Claire nods and walks out into the kitchen to call. After she hangs up she gets her coat out of the closet. She is afraid to go back in the bedroom to say good-night to Mrs. Valenti. Afraid of Josie. She opens the door to leave.

"Tell your mother I'll drop off the dress Tuesday."

"Okay." She pulls the door shut as quietly as she can behind her and walks down to the elevator.

Someone is moving out. The elevator is lined with the quilted canvas pads they use to protect the elevator's finish. Claire presses the button for the lobby and stands in the center of the floor trying not to touch the material. She hears a noise behind her. The elevator door opening: she looks both ways before she steps out into the hall and watches the door close.

There are cars outside, going both ways, with people inside going home, to the movies, to see other people. The elevator door opens behind her but no one comes out. She hears someone walking on the floor above. An old car with only one door on the side stops in front of

the building and a woman gets out. Claire squats in the corner, pressing her back against the brass door hinges.

She can see the boy's window, but only the ceiling of his room. The light is on. She wishes she could see him do his funny exercises--and not feel so frightened--or that her father would come. Again, the elevator door opens behind her but no one comes out.

Claire nudges the lobby door open with her knee and looks down the street. The elevator door closes again, and she jumps. Finally, from across the street, she recognizes her father's coat and hat. She waits for him to cross the street and open the lobby door. Then she stands up.



## THE REVENGE OF KATEY-JESUS

I have a whole box of them under the bed and no one knows about them yet, except Katey. But she's too busy anyway, going out with her boyfriend Tony and keeping Mom and Dad from finding out about it 'cause she's just fifteen and he's twenty. So I got them all to myself. Not that anyone else would want to read movie magazines about Liz Taylor and Richard Burton doing nasty things all over the movie sets in make-believe Egypt. They're probably only doing it for the publicity anyway. There's a few confession magazines on the bottom of the box. They have titles like, "He Loved Me But I Couldn't Stop Being A Prostitute." I don't read them.

Like today, this morning I went out and dug my mother a bunch of dandelions all the way straight down to get the tap root 'cause otherwise they just come back next spring, and I got to dig them all up again, so I do a good job at that, even though Mom keeps saying every spring, "There it is, coming back to haunt you," I dug them out. They just always come back anyway, with the Sweeneys and the Conroys just mowing the tops off of theirs. Steven and Mickey Sweeney and those Conroy boys are always playing stickball in the street between our house and theirs making lots of noise. But Dad always takes their side.

He says they have the right since they live on the street, too.

So after I do the digging and throw the weeds away in the garbage can in the garage, and for the third time in a row this Saturday step on one of those wasp babies, I'm still sitting up in my room with an epsom salt plaster on my foot and the window open just a little so I can still hear Stevie yelling outside, but I'm not reading the magazines. And it's too hot to leave the window closed all the way. I'm working on something secret. My English teacher says someday I'm going to be a writer or somebody famous. So she told me to write it all down. Here it is:

### Three of My Secret Ambitions by Claire Mary Agnes McKenna

One of my fondest dreams is to become an actress. Not in television shows but on a Musical-Comedy on Broadway. I think an ideal show would be "The Sound of Music." Of course, with all the money, I would like to travel throughout the world. I would like most to see Ireland and Hawaii.

When I finally settle down, I would build a house overlooking a deep blue lake. The area would be far from any city, although there might be a small town five miles away. Around me I would like to have a few, but very close, rich friends. This would give me a complete sense of security.

Finally, I would like to marry a far cousin of some royal European family. He will have to be different and exciting and most of all he must like children. Speaking of children, I would like as many as possible. I believe children are the happiest beings in the world. Thus, I feel that if none of my other ambitions are achieved, I may at least be permitted to have children of my own.

The magazine with Delores Hart is my favorite. It has a picture of her in a see-through raincoat standing out in front of the Gates of the Carmelites trying to duck reporters. She's so beautiful, probably only five-foot-five, I'm already five-foot-eight and still growing. Every time we get new shoes, Katey still wears the same size, but not me.

I already can't wear the shoes I wore to Aunt Margie's wedding last summer. Speaking of Katey, that guy Tony she's going out with is sure cute. But he started talking to me first. He's from Italy, and doesn't speak English too well. But good enough to get the job on the crew digging the sewers outside our house. That month they were doing Newport was nice 'cause then the guys couldn't play ball out by my window, and then it was quieter and a person could leave their window open and still think.

Anyway, Mom bought this old Pontiac and it was gray and boring looking, so Katey and me volunteered to paint it and Dad said he didn't want any part of it. But Mom said she still wanted it painted, and we picked out French Blue for the color. Katey and me were out in the driveway and trying to keep the dust off it long enough for the paint to dry, and Katey goes inside for some ice water. Right away this guy comes up and starts saying Little Sister, Little Sister to me and makes conversation about the color of the car and how he never saw a blue like that when he was in France, till Katey comes out again, but this time in her checker-cloth table-top halter and shorts, and he starts talking to her and doesn't pay any more attention to me. And the next thing I know Kate's telling me if I tell on her she'll tell Mom and Dad I got a bunch of sleazeball magazines under my bed, so even if I was gonna tell I wouldn't. But when I get rid of them next week, I might anyhow.

Besides, all I wanted was the movie magazines and that was bad enough. That Gabby is always getting me in trouble. I was over at her house and looking at magazines and talking about Katey-Jesus on the

cross and how it should be Father McMahon or Tony, at least, because he has a job. The only thing Katey does is babysit, and that doesn't count. And Gabby said, "But God is dead anyhow, so it doesn't really matter."

"What?"

"God is dead. I've just come to understand that."

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, have you ever seen him?"

"No."

"Ever had him answer you when you asked for something?"

"No. But the Gospel says, God doesn't always answer our little requests."

"My cousin says that's a ruse."

"What's a ruse?"

"They just tell you that so you don't expect anything big to happen. Like a miracle or something."

"Oh."

"I don't say prayers anymore at night. Do you?"

"Well, not every night."

"But most every night, I bet. Did you last night?"

"Yes."

"And the night before?"

"Yes. I have to. If I don't say my prayers, my dad will get mad."

"How will he know?"

"He asks me."

"So? Lie."

"Gabby! Then I'll go to hell," I say and know before I say it that she's gonna laugh at me, and she does.

She holds up the May issue of Stargazer and points to "Liz and Dick" on the cover. "Liz Taylor doesn't look like she's in hell. I'll bet she doesn't say her prayers every night and worry about going to hell half as much as you do. It's all a bunch of stories, Claire. But we're not gullible little kids anymore, are we?"

"No, I guess not."

"Then if God is dead, and you don't have to worry about going to hell, I think you should take some of these magazines home with you and enjoy them."

"But they're on the condemned list."

"No they're not! Only books and movies. Haven't you ever looked at the list?"

"Yes." Lies to your friends are only half-lies. I've never looked at the list.

"Settled, then."

"But just movie magazines. My Dad'll kill me if he finds those confession ones."

"Don't exaggerate. He might hit you, but he won't kill you."

"What? How can you joke about that?"

"Claire, come on. Your dad isn't going to hit you."

"But he could."

"So you're never going to do anything because he might get mad? Besides, I'm your best friend. Would I let you get into trouble with your dad?"

"Well. . . I guess not."

But when Gabby got the box out and started throwing all her old magazines in there, she dropped a couple or six or seven confession magazines in, and I told her not to but she said they were real good to read, too. But they're not. They scare me. Besides, the movie ones are written much better and have color pictures on some of the pages.

Anyway, so today after I get the swelling down on the wasp baby bite, my Mom and Dad come home early before Kate is back from her date with Tony and the first thing they do is start asking questions like where's your sister. and I say I don't know. Don't tell me you don't know, Dad says. I don't know, I say. You been here all day, my mother says, and I say I don't know, and anyhow after five minutes I know they know, that they musta seen those two on the way home, he's got this big old Oldsmobile with a great big front seat and three chromium rings on each side, real old, but not as old as the Pontiac we painted, and they let me go back upstairs to listen to the stupid boys play their stupid stickball so loud I can hardly hear the door open on my parents' bedroom when Katey comes home.

And while I'm waiting I'm reading the whole article about Delores Hart again, 'cause as soon as I can I gotta get these movie magazines out of here and back over to Gabby's house 'cause sure as heck Kate's gonna think I told or at least be so mad at all of us for getting caught that she's gonna make sure she's not getting all the attention. So I'm reading and I hear Mom and Dad's bedroom door open again, and then Dad threatening Kate with telling everything to the entire membership of the Legion of Mary--even Monsignor Dougherty and Father Scanlon--then

I hear my mother at the foot of the stairs saying, And thank goodness you have a sister who cares enough about you to tell us. And Katherine, don't forget to take your laundry up with you.

So she comes up to our room and I know if Dad tells on her she'll be kicked out of the Legion of Mary and that means she won't play Jesus in the Easter Pageant next week.

Gabby says the Legion of Mary should be renamed the Legion of Mary 'cause there's nary a one except Kate that's got a boyfriend and she's not going to be able to see him soon, and they're all of them friends before they joined up. Annette and Marion and Kathy Sullivan all live on our block. The four others live on Jennifer Lane or the circle. On Sunday afternoons they go out in Annette's car and ride around, cruising the monasteries, burning off two or three tanks of gas between here and Connecticut and back. All seven wear the exact same Blessed Heart of Mary medallion and Annette is looking at three convents. One in the Berkshires. Her dashboard Jesus has tiny skis glued to the bottom of his stand.

So Katey comes up to our room finally, and I know if Dad tells on her she'll be kicked out of the Legion and that means she can't be Jesus. I stuff my movie magazine under the covers and wait for her. But she won't look at me. She pretends to care which way her slip straps fold up and places them in the drawer in reverse rainbow order and then starts folding shirts and slacks even though she's gonna just put them on the hanger and hang them in her closet. The one I painted the big Indian on because that's her high school mascot and Mom thought it would be nice if I did something nice and artistic around the house

once in a while. Kate got in National Honor Society already and once I tried on her pin--she skipped ahead a year--but I want to be an artist, not a student.

Shut up, she says, and I haven't even said a word.

And when she's done with all the hangers and the slips and the underpants and the sixteen pairs of stockings all folded heel to toe and exactly ten times before she dumps them in the box in her drawer marked SCHOOL which is next to the box marked CHURCH, she closes each drawer with a sharp shove of her palm and slides the big plywood door of her closet closed, bang, and I shove the magazine down under the covers even farther.

"Do you think Delores Hart was in love with a married man?"

"Shut up," she says.

But she sits on her bed facing me, 'cause that's the only way her bed will face in her part of the room without taking up all the wall, which she wants free to hang "things" on but doesn't, and pile her books up against so she looks studious even though she only goes to the library and borrows them, and she pulls the Jesus costume out of her sewing bag. The Legion of Mary voted unanimously to sew them by hand, themselves. They should be called the Legion of Martyrs.

"You don't think I told them?"

"You're the only one who knew. What did they ask you?"

"Where you were, who you were with. The usual."

"And?"

"I told them I didn't know."

"You did not."



"I did. I didn't know where you went. And anyhow, they already knew who you were with. And that you were all dressed up."

"Because you told them."

"No, I did not tell them." She still won't believe me, so I lie. "Dad hit me. So I told them what you were wearing. That turquoise blue dress with the pink print scarf that goes with it, stockings, your dyed-to-match high heels from Aunt Margie's wedding, no hat, no gloves. Like church, but not. Did you wear your church stockings?"

"What difference does that make?"

"Well, if you wore your church stockings maybe you're in love."

"I'm not 'in love.' That's for kids like you."

"But he's cute and you see him every Saturday."

"Well, that doesn't mean I'm in love. You need to grow up a little, Claire Mary. A man and a woman can spend time together and not be sex-u-al."

"Not when one of them puts on two layers of Odo-Ro-No and shaves her legs before she goes out with the other one. And wears a red slip."

"You did tell them."

"What?"

"The slip."

"What? Is it fuschia?"

"You told them!"

"I did not!"

"I don't care. Shut up."

And she returns to her costume sewing and for the rest of the

night that's all she does, pulling that needle in and out and making a big display of how long her thread stretches over her head and doesn't even get tangled like mine always does, 'cause she's got ma-tur-i-ty, until right before she goes to bed, she comes over to my side of the room and leans over my bed.

"I don't care what you told them. I'm never going to tell you anything again, ever."

But she never told me anything anyhow. The only way I found it was Tony for sure she was sneaking out with on Saturdays was that I read her diary. I could be Delores Hart's little sister, waving good-bye in the rain to reporters without having my hair frizz up. Two sisters giving their hearts to Christ. If only I was shorter.

Gabby says if Delores Hart had won an Oscar this year Liz Taylor would of joined a convent, too. But then I said they'd never let her in, and Gabby pushed me off her bed.

Except then the next day I sit down on my bed and reach under the covers for my magazine and it's gone. And Gabby says it was probably Katey and I should get the rest of the magazines out of the house pronto and so I go back and look in the back of my closet behind the birthday corsages, paper and safety pins, and the box isn't there either. So I slide the Indian all the way over so just his hatchet shows behind the other closet door and no box in Katey's closet either.

I have looked everywhere and I can't find them. Luckily, Mom and Dad are at dress rehearsal for the Pageant, Nothing Wednesday, and baby Michael is downstairs, taking a nap. I'm supposed to be babysitting, but I'm not getting paid so I can do anything I want.

Gabby isn't home the first time I call her. She has a new magazine with Connie Francis and Tony Perkins on the cover. Once Gabby made up a test and I had to memorize all of Connie Francis' movies in order: Where The Boys Are, Follow The Boys, and Looking For Love.

"So, where've you been?" I ask after a while, after Gabby tells me all about Connie Francis' new movie, When The Boys Meet The Girls.

"Pa-geant. You shoulda seen them, Clarabella." I hate it when she calls me that. Next time I'm gonna call her Gab-riella. "Your father and mine, kneeling and genuflecting in front of a girl. Well, so did you find my magazines?"

"No. I've looked everywhere in the house, and they're not here."

"Hmm. Well, Katey's got them for sure, don't you think?"

"Yeah, but she's grounded, from Tony, still. She can't go anywhere."

"That's right," Gabby says. "Hey, wait a minute! She's been going to church every day this week. You don't suppose she just wrapped them up in her Jesus costume and snuck them out of the house? Where's she been changing for the show?"

"In the sacristy."

"That's it then. It's logical. It's the only other place she's been but home. They gotta be there. And we gotta get them out fast, cause her last performance is Easter Sunday, and whatever she's gonna do with them, she's gonna do it before then."

"She's gonna show them to Father McMahon isn't she? And my Dai?"

"Yeah. And where else would you be more afraid of getting caught? It's perfect. Katey knows you like a book."

"Okay. So how are we gonna get in there?"

"Not we. You."

"Oh, jeez."

"Be quiet and listen. You could make a special request for a personal confession."

"Oh, God. Don't make me do that."

"Well, our only other choice as I see it is for one of us to fake a faint or throw up all over Katey-Jesus' feet in the middle of the Stations of the Cross. Then you go raid the sacristy."

"Me? Why me?"

"Can you make yourself puke anytime you want?"

"You know I can't. I can't even make myself burp."

"Then I puke, you burgle."

"Oh, Jesus. I don't know how to burgle either."

"Just think about it a lot. Something will come to you. You're smart."

"Can I go to hell for doing it?"

"I thought we agreed God is dead?"

"Well, yeah. But I don't want to take any chances. In case he isn't."

"I'll write you a note."

"What?"

"No, Claire. You won't go to hell. Just keep thinking what's gonna happen if she shows them to Father McMahon and your dad, at the same time. After Easter Sunday service."

My English teacher says I'm really good at figuring out poems. We get The Atlantic Monthly every month in class and she can never figure out what the poems are about. I'm working on a poem. Here it is:

Tony  
by Claire Mary Agnes McKenna

Here stands the athlete victorious,  
No task too great, no wish too spurious.  
His hair, his manner, all who see admire,  
He is the very pineapple of desire.

I wrote one in French yesterday but I lost it, and I can't remember the words. Anyway, I'm too nervous to write poetry. I once took some change from my father's dresser, but he wasn't even home. The thought of burglarizing the sacristy gives me the heeby jeebies. I mean, what if someone comes in? Or stays behind when Gabby pukes? What do I say? Jesus left a movie magazine for me in here? Gabby says they'll all be gone the other way and no one will be able to hear me over the racket of the metal mop bucket anyway, but she's not the one who's gonna get caught.

And then it's finally time, Dad and me driving down Central Avenue on the way to Saint Eugene's. He parks the car next to Annette's car and we go in, but I have to go to the bathroom already, and I'm afraid to say I do, 'cause then he won't believe me later when I say I do, but I go anyway. Nobody's in the bathroom, just like Gabby and me planned it and so I go and then I wash my hands 'cause I'm real nervous anyhow and they're sweating, and when I come out Gabby's still not here and Dad is almost over with his rosary. He's in the second row with his coat folded over the back of the pew. I genuflect, cross myself and slide in beside him. It's still daylight, but his Knights of Columbus pin glows pinkish inside with all the candles lit up. He is annoyed I didn't get my rosary out of my pocket before I came in. I never learn. He keeps going ". . .blessed art thou," and I begin with him in the middle,

"amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy wound, Jesus. . . ."

Katey-Jesus hangs in front of us. Number thirteen. Death, removal and sealing of the tomb yet to go. This is the solo.

She tied her hair back like my mother wanted. "Holy Mary, Mother of God pray for our sinners. . . ." I pass two Our Father beads before Gabby finally shows up. Dad has all his rosary said and I'm still mumbling like I'm not finished so he won't get up and go. In the doorway, I can see the priest's floor shining like it's never been walked on and I know they're gonna know it's me even if I don't get caught red-handed, just by my foot prints. I think they must have those women clean the bottoms of their shoes so they don't leave any marks. Anyway, Gabby comes in, waves, and I tell Dad I'll be right back, and the nuns come in for prayers. Full house. Gabby goes up and genuflects slowly, waiting to see me reach the bathroom, then goes around the left side of the shrine and pukes all over the hem of Katey-Jesus's costume. Not that anyone coulda seen the finger, but I knew how she was gonna do it and was watching for it from the bathroom door. I figure since I knew, it was a mortal sin anyway.

Right away the whole bunch of people in the front row cover their faces and the nuns come running, going the other way down the hall to get the mop and bucket and I sneak into the sacristy.

God, but I'm gonna be in trouble. I feel like I'm sneaking into my father's dresser drawer when he's right out in the dining room. Everything is so neat. The knotty pine wall of drawers and cupboards, all oiled and freshly polished, and the mirror like I could see every zit on my face all at once, with the light coming in from behind, not

even a light over the mirror. I wonder if there's a law against a priest looking in the mirror except to see if his hassock's on straight. I once heard that the nuns don't have any mirrors. But I can hardly believe that. Delores Hart wouldn't have to look into the mirror to tell she's pretty.

I go through the knotty pine stuff first. The magazines aren't in the first set of cupboards. I'm only looking in places where the box could fit, and wondering if that's a mistake. She could've changed boxes, or just stashed them all over without a box at all. I can't worry about that. The first drawer is just purples, the second reds, the third white, for Easter, and all the linen is under the dresser with the big double drawers at the bottom. The drawers are on silent metal rollers and just as I get one out and start into it, I hear a sound behind me and it's Father McMahon and I'm lucky because he's at least not gonna kill me first, but he turns around and gestures to my father. I'm gonna go to hell, for sure, forever and forever, and nothing's ever gonna stop it. But first I'm gonna get yelled at.

I missed the conversation my father and mother had with Katey about Tony. I can't imagine it was any more comfortable for her than the one I had about the sacristy and sacrilege and the sacredness of the priest's linens, that it wasn't just like a common thief had pulled off such a stunt. But my father is just sitting there rubbing his Knights of Columbus pin with his little finger and I wonder how he felt when the sisters caught him smoking in the orphanage when he was ten, and I wonder if he was sitting just like me then, with his head kinda down, forgetting for as long as he's yelled at that he's gonna go to hell for what he

did, and making the sister's face go in and out of focus and bigger and smaller, and then making believe she's someone else completely 'cause they never really want any answers, so you just say yes ma'am and no ma'am till they stop. So I sit there and think about what I'm gonna buy myself the first day I get off grounding and if I'm ever gonna get involved in Gabby's harebrained God-is-dead schemes anymore. Maybe I'll get off with two years in purgatory.

And no visitors or phone calls, or anything, and that's the end of it for now. Later Dad will come upstairs and give his explanation for what he punished me with, but it will still be the same punishment, and I think he only does that to appease himself for thinking that he'd like to let me off. But he can't. He's responsible for the salvation of my soul, and that weighs heavy on him.

So I'm out picking dandelions again, and Kate's being Jesus again, 'cause it's only Holy Saturday and she still has one show to go. I go out in the garage real careful so I don't step on another of those wasp babies. They hatch out in the rafters and fall on the floor sometimes. You'd think I'd wear shoes, but not this year 'cause I'm smarter and I'll be more careful and not step on them. They're not exactly hard to see against the gray concrete, you know. I should be able to see them.

For a while I'm alone and the Sweeney boys aren't playing stickball and Mom isn't picking roses and Dad isn't cursing the lawn mower. So it's quiet and I make up lines of poetry even though they'll never get written down, 'cause my English teacher says it's good for me to practice speaking poetically so someday I'll make a fortune selling poems. But then I see a piece of paper or something sticking out of the dirt around



the rose bushes, the dirt I just weeded yesterday, and I can tell it's just been put there 'cause it's not ragged and pulpy but still holding together and flat. I pull it out and it's that goddamn magazine with Delores Hart, "Coming back to haunt me," as my mother always says, and I think she's right this time. I look around and there's more of them under the lilacs I just did last night and the wall around the elm I weeded earlier this morning and there are magazines sticking up all over the place and dontcha know I know who buried them there thinking I would think she'd get rid of them at church.

As soon as Dad finishes changing his clothes from seeing Katey-Jesus on the cross and having some peanut-butter toast, they'll both be out here, and I gotta get those magazines into the trash and covered with yesterday's garbage. So I start making the rounds with the stuff, digging with the little hand trowel--at least she didn't dig them down very far--and the next thing I know I hear my Dad in the dining room headed for the back door, and I pick up the ones I've got and take them in my arms, getting worm juice and everything all over me and the clean shorts I just put on today in case Stevie came out even though I couldn't talk to him 'cause my parents might see me, and I go out in the garage and there's the bin half-full, just perfect to hide them in, and I start to go for it and whammo, I step on a wasp baby and I'm so mad I forget Dad is right in the yard already and start to yell, and of course he comes around the corner to see what's wrong and there I am standing on one foot with the other in my hand and all the true confession magazines falling on the floor around me, slipping through the one arm I still have left to hold onto them with. "I Was A Whore For The FBI," and "He

Threatened To Kill Me If I Didn't Do What He Wanted." And then Annette's car pulls up and Katey gets out and says, "Hi, Dad, hi Clara," calling me Clara as sweet as you please, 'cause she knows it bugs me. "Did you have a nice morning?" and with her black robe still on and her Easter flowers a day early 'cause she was in the Pageant. And Dad doesn't say anything but just rubs the dirt on his hands and waits for Mom to come out too.

Gabby's starting to read the Liz Taylor ones. But I don't want to. She wants me to take a few home and see if I feel different after a few articles, but I don't want to. We're going to the movies the first Saturday I'm off groundings, if When The Boys Meet The Girls is still playing by that time. But after the show, instead of riding around on the bus like we usually do, I'm gonna get off at Roxbury Drive and walk home. That Gabby is always getting me into trouble. And maybe I'm not going to be her friend anymore.

Katey's gonna be gone Saturday, too. I don't think she's going with Tony anymore, but I found out where she keeps her diary now, and Saturday, when she's gone, I'm gonna find out. I'm not gonna tell. I'm just curious. Besides, I'm not doing anything I could get in trouble for and the dandelion season is over. I'm tired of the poetry they publish in The Atlantic. I'm gonna write my own so I'll have something to read that I like and then I'll be famous.

## SUGAR AND SPICE

Tonight I went over to Mary and Bill's for the anniversary party but it was almost over. There was the usual stuff: potato salad, rye whiskey, men in sweaty shirts all over the house playing cards, talking in the living room, banging their fists on the table and laughing. Everywhere I went, I felt them grab at my arms. Like in the living room, when I was still looking for Mary, Mr. McGinley grabbed me, telling me to "comere." I slipped away from him. "Do you know where Mary is?" I asked him, not waiting for him to say anything or grab me again, with his big hands all sweaty and smelling like the arm of his metal chair, but he got me again and I twisted away. She was out there in the kitchen washing dishes by herself. No air except for the little bit coming through the door where she'd propped it open--not enough to raise goose bumps on her bare back--and moths flying around the kitchen above the sink.

"Mary, what's 'parking'?"

She turned and looked at me. "What kind of parking do you mean?"

"The kind when you're out on a date. That's what Leslie Schiff wanted to do the other night. He just kept asking me, 'Where do people park around here?' and I didn't know what he was talking about. I

never heard that expression."

"Kissing," she said, and wrung out the dish rag.

"Is there something bad about it?"

"No, but your mom wouldn't want you doing it."

"If you were my mom would you let me?"

"How old are you, Claire?"

"Almost seventeen."

"Sixteen then, barely. You just had a birthday. No, I wouldn't let you. Not yet."

"Why not?"

"Do you remember when you told me about Jimmy Harris feeling up your leg in ninth grade biology?"

"Yeah."

"Did you like that?"

"No! It was creepy."

"That's why."

"Huh?"

"Because boys are clumsy and in a hurry and you don't want them to be. You want them to be gentle and take you to movies and not want to kiss afterwards, and to be as naive and innocent as you are. And Claire, I don't know anyone as innocent as you seem to be."

I started to argue.

"Claire, you don't. . . ."

Mr. Pascucci came into the kitchen and grabbed a six-pack of beer from the fridge. He wore the kind of T-shirt my dad never wears, with the little straps and no sleeves, and his back was as hairy as his

chest. Mary laughed at the face I made.

"See?" she said. "They all grow hair, and you don't even like that. They want to kiss and you don't want to do that either."

I dried a few dishes and put them away, then cleared the silverware out of the drainer. "Sometimes I think it would be nice for a boy to kiss me."

"Who, Claire? That's like saying you want 'someone' to fix the sink. If it's not a plumber, it's not going to do you any good."

"I don't know. No one, I guess. I meet lots of boys at school, but I don't like any of them that much. I don't want any of them to kiss me. Richard Dillman, maybe."

"Richard Dillman? I don't remember him."

"My mom and dad wouldn't let me go out with him. 'Cause one day he came over with his slides and was showing me his family's vacation to the Grand Canyon, and when mom got back from the grocery store, she found us in the dining room looking at the slides and made him leave and said I couldn't go out with him anymore."

"When was that?"

"Last summer."

"Did he ever touch you in a way that you liked."

"Uh-huh."

"Claire! You never told me!"

"I liked him a lot. He had a motor scooter and was a senior and was really nice. He used to touch my knee when he talked to me, and would look into my eyes like he was trying to see inside me."

"You really liked him."

"Yeah. But when mom and dad said I couldn't see him, then he wouldn't even sneak around with me, and started going with another girl, a senior, too. At first I was mad at him, and then I just missed him. You know."

"Yeah." Mary smiled at me. "There's other boys you'll like, Claire. When you get older, and your parents learn to trust you. Then you can pick your boyfriends."

"I wish you were my mom. It feels like my mom and dad, if they're not fighting with each other, they're picking on me."

"Oh, careful. Your mom and dad love you a lot. They worry about you. You're just very naive. I'd worry about you if you were my daughter, too. You need to learn how to protect yourself better from boys like Leslie and Jimmy. Not get yourself into those situations. You do tend to be backward at times, you know?"

"But how do you know? How can you tell what those boys are like?"

"Get to know them. But don't get in a car, or off just by yourself with him if you don't know him very well."

"What do you mean?"

"Things like ice-skating dates, with other kids. Why don't you ever go out with any of the boys in the neighborhood? The ones you've known for a long time."

"Like Stevie?"

"Yeah, like Stevie. I remember you two were 'engaged' back in grade school."

"He gave me a ring out of blue plastic with yellow glass."

"And half a tube of plastic cement all over the top of it. You

wore it all the time. Do you still have it?"

"Yeah. I save everything, my mom says. I still have all my birthday corsages since I was twelve, stashed in my closet."

"Why don't you ever go out with Stevie or the other boys around here?"

"They never ask me."

"You don't give them the time of day. Sometimes you walk right by them when they're playing ball and don't even give them a by-your-leave."

"Well, so? Stevie's never home. And when he is, him and those other boys only play stickball. It drives a person crazy, when they're shouting and you're trying to think. Besides, I'm not allowed to go out with any of them since Freddy told my dad off that time. Even when he came back and apologized my dad said it was just because he wanted to go out with me."

"God, it's hot." Mary wiped her forehead, brushing her hair off her face. She was the only mother I knew with real gray hair. "Go out and pick up the empties in the living room will you, Claire?"

"Okay." I took the bag she handed me and went out where the men were playing poker. Their loud voices made it seem hotter. I slid between the backs of their chairs and the breakfront on the far side, picking up glasses and cans, wondering how they could stand it, and trying to keep out of their reach.

Mr. McGinley shuffled, ready to deal. Bill got up to go to the kitchen and got caught in the lawn chair as he turned around.

"Where you going?" Mr. McGinley said.

-2-

"Nowheres, from the looks of it," Bill said. The chair folded over him and he laughed, his legs sticking straight out, skinny and sunburned.

"Sonsabitchin' cheap aluminum," Mr. Pascucci said, reaching for my arm. "Come here, Claire, get me another beer, willya?" He clung to me and I twisted away. He tossed me the empty can.

"Hey, Pascucci, you gonna deal those cards or scare little girls?" Bill said.

Mr. Pascucci looked at me. "You in, Bill?" he said, holding a card over the empty place.

"No, I'm out."

I wanted to thank him and followed him into the kitchen. But he was behind Mary, whispering in her ear, hugging her waist. She kept washing, and snuggled her cheek against his neck.

"Come away with me, my darling," he whispered, and pulled her away from the sink. He almost tripped over the throw rug, then caught her again, and drew her into the center of the kitchen and twirled her around the little rug.

"Now you just go play poker," she said, smiling.

"No," he said, and slid his arm up her back.

"Stop. Claire and me are talking girl talk and don't want to be disturbed." She laughed at him and pulled the bra strap back under her dress. She stepped back to the sink, running the water again, but he grabbed her again, twirling her to the center of the room, her back bare except for the red and white dress straps and Bill's arm.

"Happy anniversary," he said.



They stopped and looked at each other and kissed. I realized their mouths were open and they were kissing with their tongues. I opened the broom closet and grabbed the broom, then slammed it shut, but they didn't take any notice, and I stepped out and brushed off the porch steps, not watching them anymore, then leaned the broom on the rail and walked on down the steps.

"I'm going, Mary," I said. "I'll be back later to help with the dishes," but I said it to the lilac bushes by the driveway 'cause I was already halfway to the sidewalk by then.

I felt dizzy. I opened the back door to my house, and took a deep breath, realizing I hadn't taken one at all since I'd stepped out their door. My lungs felt small and tight. Dad's plate was on the dining room table, but no dad. And no mom in her room. It looked like they left in a hurry, with dad's teabags still standing next to his mug, and the Times folded in half.

I went upstairs to my room and turned on my giant fan. With it on I couldn't hear the music, or the cars leaving Mary's, or anything that went on over there.

Parking is kissing. So all that time Leslie Schiff drove me around Jennifer Lane and the Circle, and the part of Sprain Parkway that wasn't finished yet, he just wanted to play kissing games with me, like Jimmy Harris in Biology, and Glenn. I thought Leslie was older and more mature, but after he took me to the movies he drove around even though it was after my curfew and I had to get home. He kept asking, "Where do you park around here?"

Around one in the morning he got tired of asking, or got tired of

me, and drove back to my house. He reached across the seat and popped open my door.

"Goodnight, Leslie," I said. But he didn't say anything to me, and I didn't know what to say back, since he didn't say anything back, the creep, and I just went inside.

And got grounded for six weeks. My mother said, "What are Mary and Mrs. Pascucci and the other neighbors going to think? A girl out in a car at this hour." All because I just didn't know he wanted to neck, and he wouldn't tell me what he really wanted. He just never said anything except "park."

The fan rattle got to me and I got up and turned it lower, and from the top half of the window I could see the party still going, the cars still parked on Newport and no end in sight. I wanted to be alone with Mary and ask her about the words men used to tell me what they wanted.

I thought I could still see Mary and Bill dancing in the kitchen, and shut the fan off completely to hear. They were laughing. I wondered how it felt, being in love, dancing with someone nice like Bill. At least he was nice when he wasn't drunk. Someone who didn't run his hand up your dress while you danced. I wondered what it would be like to be with someone and not be wearing dress-up clothes that were always too small and didn't let me breathe, like now when it was so hot and I couldn't stand having my clothes next to my skin. But I could never walk around half-naked like Gabby and some other girls I know--then the boys really stare at me. Not even in my own back yard, 'cause then the boys line up on our side of Newport, waiting their turn at bat, and

look over the bushes into our yard. And the bushes are only waist high anyway, and I can never wear just a bathing suit or halter-top to do weeding or sunbathe 'cause they stare. Earlier today, when they were playing ball, I just held my shirt away from my skin, letting the air come under and cool me, and they whistled and made faces.

I got tired of trying to hear Mary and Bill and went back outside, and sat on the lawn facing their house, feeling not quite as hot and sticky. The sun was down, but the temperature was still 90 or more and humid, like walking into the bathroom after someone's taken a long hot bath. The grass prickled the backs of my legs and my mosquito bites itched. What would it be like? Would I always be trying to figure out what boys wanted, and them not telling me? Bill and Mary were more what I wanted to be like, but not quite. I used to dream of the perfect man. Older, dark, with whiskers, and that was something Bill didn't have. I could still hear the music, and see just the two of them in the kitchen.

I didn't hear Stevie walk up. "Whatcha doin', Clara?"

"Oh! Stevie. . . I didn't hear you. You scared me." I never called him BoyBoy anymore, but he liked to call me Clara, from what my dad nicknamed me, Clarabelle.

"Sorry. I just got finished playing ball and walked home. You look like you're thinking."

"I am."

"Mind if I sit with you?"

"That would be fine."

He sat beside me, and laid his bat and glove on the other side.

"How's school?" he said.

"Okay."

"You like it better now?"

"I guess so. School's school."

"Oh no, not so. I'm really enjoying being at Vermont."

"Right. But I'm still at Roosevelt High."

He didn't say anything for a bit, then, "Claire, I'd really like to show you what it's like for me in Vermont. I've got some slides. Would you like to see them?"

"I'd love to. Where are they?"

"In my room. I'll get them and the projector and bring them over."

"We can't."

"Why?"

"I'm not allowed to be alone in the house with boys."

"I'm sorry. I thought your mom and dad were home."

"No."

"We could watch them at my house."

"I don't know. People are drinking and stuff and I'm not really sure my mom and dad would want me there, at least not this late."

"What time is it?"

"Nine."

"Well, we can walk over to the Scarsdale library and back."

"I have to be in by eleven."

"I have a watch. We'll both keep track of time. Come on. I don't want to just sit here and grow dandelions on my butt."

We went the fast way, over the aqueduct and down Remson road. Steep

but straight, a thirty-degree angle to Central Avenue. It felt good to walk quickly and run sometimes and feel the wind on my face, and not have any cars and headlights coming at us. They went the other way, up Roxbury Drive, where the curve and climb were gradual.

At the baseball field we stopped to catch our breath. This was the one Stevie used to play on--when he wasn't playing stickball on Newport--and sometimes I never saw him from breakfast till nighttime without a baseball glove or bat in his hand. He took me to his favorite bench, the first-base side of Lot #7, he said, and we sat there, looking out at the chain-link fence at the edge of the light. Stevie told me about when he dropped the last fly ball of the last game back when he was 11, and they lost the season to Bob Casey's team. He almost said something else, but then sat quiet next to me and stared out across the diamond, out toward the darkness beyond the fence.

He said, "It's gonna rain soon. We should go back."

I nodded. "Stevie, do your mom and dad fight?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Just, I was talking to your mother before and I said I didn't think she fought with Bill. At least I'd never seen them."

"Yeah?"

"Well, do they?"

"Sure, once in a while. They're worse in the winter when they can't get out."

"Do they yell?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

"And they slam doors and sometimes Dad throws things, like the dinner plates, but only when I'm not around. He doesn't want me to do that, so he won't do it around me. But I hear them, and when I come downstairs the next morning, it's real easy to tell, with corned beef and cabbage in the corners."

"You're teasing me."

"Yeah, a little. They do throw things, though. I guess probably everybody does, a little."

"Yeah," I said. "But it scares me."

"How?"

"I don't want to be that unhappy, if that's how it can be when you're married sometimes. Katey says I listen too much."

"Hmmm. Do you remember that splinter you got sitting on a school bench? And the doctor painted half your leg with iodine and put a stitch in it and you wanted me and everyone else to pay special attention to you?"

"It was four inches long."

"You still have it."

"Yes."

"I figured you did."

"I save everything, Stevie--and don't change the subject."

"I'm not. I just think Katey might be right."

"You always take her side."

"She's just a little less melodramatic than you."

"What?!"

"Listen, Claire. I've seen your parents holding hands myself. If

you haven't, maybe you're not looking."

"Okay, I've seen them holding hands. But only crossing the street or something. Not smooching or anything like your mom and dad. They don't laugh and have a good time together."

"No, huh? I saw them at my parents house today, laughing and having fun."

"What?"

"They're not home now, are they?"

"No--"

"Maybe they're out taking a walk. Maybe they're out walking and holding hands or something, or even smooching."

"The only place they enjoy walking is when they take me to the Bowery and show me how lucky I should feel."

"Clara!"

"Besides, what does that have to do with my splinter?"

"Nothing." He looked at his watch. "Ten-thirty," he said, and stood up. "We can make your curfew if we run half way." He pulled me up off the bench by my hands and for a moment we faced toe to toe.

"You really dislike having Katey gone, don't you?" he said.

"That has nothing to do with it." I felt tears in the corners of my eyes. I hated Katey for going away--I wished I was old enough to go away too, to college or anywhere. Everybody was going. He wiped the tears off my cheeks.

"Steven, would you kiss me?"

He nodded and I felt his lips, dry and soft, brush mine.

"I haven't had much practice," he said, and leaned toward me again.

I felt his hands rest on my shoulders at the same moment his tongue touched my lips. I stepped back.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"No--yeah--I don't know. . . ."

"Was it okay? Did you feel anything?"

I laughed, nervous. "Yeah." He'll know--whoever it is I fall in love with--he'll know what it is that will make me feel like Mary when Bill kisses her. It wasn't the kissing: it was that second before Stevie touched my shoulder that made my skin prickle up, just when I started to feel his hand, and felt how it was different from mine, calloused and larger. He kissed me again and this time when his head moved away I felt my ear press against his cheek, just light so not all of it touched at once, and I thought maybe I should move, either closer or away, but was too scared and didn't know if he meant to touch me like that.

"We should start home."

"I know."

This was like my dream. When we walked he would put his arm on my shoulder just like Stevie did now. Walking slowly at first, afraid if we came apart he would realize it was a mistake, just BoyBoy and Clarabelle.

When we got to the aquaduct we let go, and he climbed over the fence after me into the Goldsmith's yard. Newport Road was in front of us, his house on the left, ours on the right. We kissed again, his cheek soft, not whiskery liked I'd imagined. I felt his shirt touch my shoulder and feel cool for a moment. I lifted up on my toes to



touch the little blond hairs on his cheek. There was music still coming from Mary and Bill's house and we held on to each other, balancing, swaying in time with the notes floating through the windows.

"They'll see us," I said.

"I don't care."

"Well, I just got off grounding and I don't want to get locked up in that yard again. You know, we have fewer dandelions in our yard than any other yard in the neighborhood.

"Well, it certainly does look nice. You do good work, Clarabelle."

"BoyBoy, stop teasing." I liked it, just being that close, even though we weren't touching anymore, but that was enough for now, at least. I thought: when I fall in love, when I really fall in love, he'll look inside me like Richard Dillman tried to--like he would have except for my parents always being afraid for me. There's that soft place between my shoulder and my neck that always feels nice. I won't have to tell him. That's how I'll know for sure.

Stevie reached out and took my fingers. "You look so far away, Claire," he said, and paused. "You're going to run away from home, aren't you?"

"I don't know." I looked up at him beside me. "I don't know where I'd go."

"I'm probably going to live here forever," he said. "Probably buy my mom and dad's house and raise my own family in it."

I nodded.

"You'll always be the first girl I loved."

I heard the music and voices and saw the lights on at my house and was afraid someone would see us. Walking backwards up our driveway, I stopped at the gate. "I'll miss you, Stevie. I'll miss you a lot."

He stood in Newport Road, no face anymore, just a shadow, and darkness behind. I was already alone.

## FAMILY PORTRAIT

There are three kinds of Muscatel on the shelf at the Mayfair all night market and I choose the one in the middle because it has a turquoise star on the label. I cash my paycheck and pay for it, and drive home happy, remembering the pictures I've seen in magazines, people in nice houses. They just lift the glass up and the amber flows down their throats and they laugh and put their arms around the person next to them. And the person next to them doesn't move away.

I drive up the frontage road to my eight-by-forty-foot turquoise trailer. It's clean and sparkling and looking like when I first moved in. I thought I'd always liked navy blue, but now I have fallen in love with turquoise, anything turquoise. My trailer, the tiles in my bathroom. My favorite is the plates. They're plastic Malamine and I can throw them in the air and slide them across the floor without anyone telling me what's the proper way to treat plates.

But this is not a safe place and I know it. I'm in the first line of trailers by the frontage road, and two weeks ago a man knocked on my door. He'd been stuck in the mud. I watched him while I ate my dinner. The mud came up to his hubcaps and he would stagger around the car, look at the wheels and then get in and dig himself in deeper. He

knocked on my door after a while, wanting to use the phone. But I wouldn't open the door and I told him to use the phone at the trailer park office. Then he left.

After I went to bed and I had locked all the doors and closed the windows I heard him knock, but I didn't answer. I heard the door rattle and I got so scared I couldn't hear anything but the blood ringing in my ears and my face flushed white hot, and I sat up and saw his shadow in the bedroom doorway. I screamed at him, "Go away! Get out!" and he was even drunker then and could barely turn around in the doorway and waved his hand at me. I don't know what he was trying to say, but I was scared and just wanted him out. So I know this place isn't safe, but it's mine, dammit. And I can do anything I want in it.

At the hospital where I work--I'm an aide--they told me to keep a lighter and a can of hair spray by my bed, and even showed me what a good torch the can made. But if it happens again, I already know I won't be able to do anything. I was frozen with him standing there in the doorway. I just froze, and I'm lucky I scared him off.

I hear everything at night. I can't sleep sometimes and have nightmares that I'm naked in the nursing station and all the patients are staring at me, and I can't cover myself up. There's nothing to cover up with and nothing comes out of my mouth. I can't even scream.

I take the bottle of Muscatel out of the bag and open it. But before I've got half the bottle down, I'm over the sink throwing it back up. I lie on my beautiful Navajo turquoise bedspread and demand that my body stop doing this, but I have no more control over it than when I was over the sink letting it happen. I sit in my chair and try

to read, but my eyes won't focus and for the first time I wonder if it's worth it. You know, Christmas Eve we always put the tree up together at home, and everyone was happy and excited. I can't go back now. I won't go back now. I don't have to do anything anyone says and there is turquoise all around me just because I wanted it. Just because I decided it will be that way. I'm safe enough. Safe enough, I guess, for now.

Maybe when I'm older I can be like those people in the ads. They know how to gauge the fire and sweetness, balancing it between their teeth before allowing it down. Maybe after the nausea goes away.

I take two long swallows and can't stop the waves--it's back up again and this time I pour the rest down the toilet. In the living room the phone rings.

"Claire, this is Tom Mathews," he says. Another aide on the ward I work. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing. What are you doing?"

"The same," he says. "Are you planning a Christmas?"

"No. I don't do that anymore. My parents still do, but I don't."

"Ahh," he says. "I don't either. I'm down at the Pub. Would you like to join me?"

"That would be nice. I have to change my clothes and clean up. I'll be there in a half hour or so."

"Okay. I should still be here. I'm in back, at the pool tables. Just come in and walk straight back and you'll see me."

"Okay."

What's the worst thing that could happen to me? Get too drunk to

drive home? I could take a blanket and sleep in the back of the car, or I could just not show up. I could stay home like a good girl. And be scared and alone. I want to meet this Tom. And I want to do something totally different on Christmas Eve.

Tom is in the back like he said, but not playing pool with someone like I figured, but by himself. In fact, there are very few people here. I'm feeling the Muscatel more than I thought I would, considering I threw it all up, and I reach out to steady myself on the bar. This is the first bar I've been in. It's two hundred years old, I've heard, and was the first bar built in town, back at the time of the Spanish stage coaches. When Atascadero was the halfway stop on the El Camino Real and everyone stopped here. The wood is very dark, though I feel it's less the nature of the wood itself than the people who have passed their hands across it. I stop when I reach him, my hand still clinging to the lip of the bar.

He looks up. "You look like you've been partying already."

"Yes."

"I thought you were alone."

"Yes, I was."

"Well, take it from me, that's the wrongest way to party." He lines up a shot and hits the balls. "You start asking yourself questions, about stuff you'd never ask yourself, sober, in a million years. You play pool?" he asks without turning around. "Now, there's something to keep your eye sharp, your coordination right on, and it gets you out and around other people."

"No," I say. "I've never played."

"I've been playing for years. I've taught half the people in this town to play. I'll teach you. It'll be good for you, get your mind off things."

"I don't think I could play tonight."

He takes two shots, walking around the table checking the holes, the smoothness of the material, steadying the overhead light. "I'd say you think a little too much, judging from your present state. Besides, Mac doesn't mind beginners playing on this table."

The word "beginner" makes me angry, but I don't want Tom to see that side of me yet. Not like I was with Katey. One time I pushed her into a full-length mirror and she broke it. But she was always pushing me, prodding me--not with force, but words. I won't let that happen again. I won't get that mad anymore.

But I still tell part of the truth. "It's just that I can hardly see to drive. I can't imagine lining up those little balls with that stick and hitting anything but the other side of the box."

"Table."

"Table. See? Maybe I should just sit here and watch you practice."

"I'll let you off this time. But if you're gonna spend time with me you're gonna learn to play pool, or learn to drink. I don't like it when people come down just to watch me play." He waves for the bartender to bring me a beer.

"Do you want a beer?" Tom says.

"Sure, I guess."

Does he order me another one? I don't remember. I sit on the barstool pretending to look into my beer glass, to be older than I

so I don't get carded, while I watch him play pool by himself. He walks around the table like someone on TV or something, like he always felt comfortable, whether someone was watching him or not. In the face of his composure, his grace, I feel clumsy and prop myself against the bar, bracing one foot on the stool, and stay there. He keeps playing, talking to himself, making slight gestures with the stick in the direction the ball eventually goes, looking up at me only when he is out of beer. And before I can wave to the bartender, the beer is here, and Mac takes two quarters from Tom's pile on the bar. I feel lucky to be here, that Tom wants me here with him. At midnight, Mac turns off the electric beer ads in the windows and comes our way.

"Closing time," I say between shots.

"Not quite yet. Mac hasn't said so."

But then Mac comes. "Closing time, Mathews, finish it up."

Tom looks at me. "Are you ready to go?"

"I think we have to go."

"Well, we could stay a while. I close up a lot for Mac. But we can go if you want. I know a place where we can be alone and talk. Would you like that?"

"Yes."

I can think of two places to go. The first is to park, like Leslie Schiff wanted to on our first and only movie date. I think to myself, Tom will know the places, and maybe I will find out what parking is. Or he could take me to his apartment. I can imagine where he lives, he is so much older and knows how to move around. He probably has an apartment at the Lanai with a terrace and swimming



pool. I wonder if he knows already that if he puts his arm around me I won't pull away?

He doesn't take me to either. Tom holds me up by both arms, walking out in the parking lot, and puts me into the passenger side of his car. At the four-way stop at the center of town he swings right and parks in front of the Atascadero Hotel. It's a two-story brick building with large, oversized windows on the ground floor and heavy, insulated curtains on the upper windows.

"Let me take care of registering," he says. His eyes are soft and dark and I feel comfortable. For the first time since I left home I feel comfortable--warm and secure. He will take care of all the details.

I walk up the stairs behind him, watching the small grocery bag he carries sway back and forth at his knee. The carpet changes from a large rose pattern to maroon stars and moons, as we reach the top of the stairs and enter the long second floor hall. An "EXIT" sign is at the end of the hall, through the window, and rooms on either side. Down the middle is a strip of carpet, telling me where I'm supposed to walk. I walk carefully, stepping over the unprotected wood at the edge as I enter the room. He empties the sack on the nightstand: a bottle of Maalox and a small container of cream.

"Ulcer," he says when he sees me watching him.

"Isn't beer bad for that? My dad had an ulcer and the doctor said he should quit drinking and smoking. And he quit on the spot and got better right away."

"Yeah, my parents are like that too. You gotta learn not to listen to all that establishment bullshit. Beer's the only thing I can keep

down sometimes. Except this stuff."

"But he got better. How long have you had your ulcer?"

He taps me on the head. "New thoughts, little one. Don't be afraid to think for yourself. I'm not giving up beer just because some fat old man with no original ideas of his own tells me to. It's the only thing I can keep down, I said. That's all I gotta know."

"Oh. I can't keep any of it down very well. Excuse me," and I go in the bathroom and throw up again.

"It takes practice," he yells through the door.

"I'm not sure I want to work at it." The bathroom tile is red and pink swirl, and makes my stomach worse. I wash my face and open the door, folding the towel back on the shelf like I never touched it.

"How long did it take you?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Nine, ten years."

"How old are you now?"

"Twenty-three."

That surprises me, both that he was so young then, but also that he is so young. "You started drinking when you were thirteen?"

"Everybody does, little girl. You gotta learn not to push, is all." He turns on the radio by the side of the bed and comes toward me. "Would you like to dance?"

The music is slow. Not like the music in my trailer. More like what my parents would dance to. But it's nice and he puts his arm around my back and pulls me away from the bathroom door. I couldn't resist if I wanted to.

"We're making a lot of noise, Tom. Maybe we should turn the music

down."

"Don't think, just for tonight."

"But don't we have to be quiet?"

"No one has ever been kicked out of the Atascadero. I promise."

"But there are people next door sleeping, or something. I heard them when I was in the bathroom. What if they can hear us?"

"No. No people next door. Or underneath or over our heads. No one stays in the Atascadero on Christmas Eve, ever. Just us. Besides, you're not doing anything wrong, are you?"

"But I thought I heard someone next door. And I don't like it when I know people can watch or listen to what I'm doing."

"Relax, little one. It's good for your stomach. There's no one here but us. I checked it out with the room clerk when I registered. We're the only ones here. Everyone else is off baking cookies for Santa Claus and wondering what they're gonna get tomorrow. Presents, that's all anyone's worrying about tonight."

"I hate the commercialism."

"Ah, yes. I, myself, just went out and bought a bunch of presents for my kids this morning."

"Kids? Plural?" I take a step back, but Tom pulls me closer again.

"That's why I got the ulcer. I just got divorced."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"No, don't be sorry. She was a bitch and I'm glad to be out of it. I can't believe I stayed married for so long."

"Oh. Is she the Norma on your arm?"

"Yes." He looks at it. A heart with a ribbon blowing across it and the letters N O R M A across the whole thing. There's another on his other forearm, except it says M O T H E R.

"You could get it erased."

"Now that's a brilliant suggestion. Have you ever seen an 'erased' tattoo? Sometimes it makes your whole arm turn black. And it hurts like hell besides. I'd rather keep it as a reminder, anytime I feel stupid again."

"I didn't know." I really didn't, even though there's a guy at work who had one erased. I just assumed since he'd done it, it wasn't that hard. But I guess I really didn't think it through. "How many kids do you have?"

"Two. A boy and a girl. They're at my mother's tonight, 'cause Norma's off drinking. And my mother's stuck with them again."

"Poor babies."

"Mmmm. They're okay. Mom likes the kids and they like her. At least they're fed and cleaned up at my mother's. Norma's always leaving them in the car when she goes to the bars, or leaving them at my mother's for the night and not coming back for two weeks. At least they're with their own family tonight. Listen, let's not talk about her." He squeezes me around the waist and dips me. I hold on tight to his shoulder and try not to think about throwing up.

"You don't seem any better on your feet than when you first came into the Pub tonight."

"Well, I've got more booze in me now. What did you expect, buying me all those beers?"

"But it's only beer."

"I don't have any capacity for alcohol. I've never drunk. Anyway, I was drunk already when I got to the Pub. And threw up twice. I don't know why I'm telling you all this. It makes me sound terrible."

He presses up against me and holds me tighter around the back.

"I won't let you fall. I'll take care of you, Claire. It's the least I can do since you're new in town and can't hold your liquor."

I laugh and he lets me down on the bed gently. "Are you tired?" he asks.

"Pretty tired."

"You're gonna have to learn to hold your liquor if you're gonna make it around here. It's the chief, no, the only form of entertainment besides working." He brushes my hair back away from my eyes. "You have lots to learn, little one. I could teach you, if you want to change."

I nod and fall asleep, or dead from the Muscatel, and I am not alone. I can hear him sleeping next to me when I roll over and wake up, then go back to sleep again, aware that I've had no nightmares, despite the footsteps in the hallway beside the room, the sound of car engines starting below the window. I fall into deep sleep. At dawn I get up again, thirsty and my head pounding, and go in the bathroom for a drink. I turn the light on, run the water till it's cold, and drink two glasses. Then I hear someone knock and a woman's voice call Tom's name. I look the bathroom door, turn off the light and water, and listen as Tom gets up and walks across the room.

"I thought I'd find you here," a woman's voice says. Norma?

"Well, so here I am. Aren't you smart. Now you can leave."

"No, I'm not going yet. I know you've got someone up here with you, that new girl. It's just like you to find another high school cutie to lie to. No one your own age buys your crap anymore."

"That's enough. I listened to your crap long enough before we got divorced. I'm not going to. . . ." I hear footsteps in the room. She must be inside now.

"Oh, yes you are. You're not going to leave Miss Prom Night stuck in the bathroom and I'm not going till I've had my say. You promised me--you promised your kids--that you'd be home last night. 'Go on, Norma,' you said. 'Have a good time, Norma. I'll take care of the kids.' Now I got your mother calling me a drunk and a slut at six in the morning. That's a bunch of bullshit if you ask me."

"Well, nobody's asking you. And nobody's going to ask you. My mother takes better care of those kids than you ever thought of doing."

"Oh, right. First you lie to me, then to your mother, and then to the kids. I wonder what you're telling her."

I check the door to make sure it's locked but it's dark and I can't tell which way the switch is turned and I'm not sure in the first place which way it's supposed to be turned to be locked. God--if she kicks the door open and calls me a slut--I deserve it for sleeping with him. I hardly know him. But she shouldn't fight with him, not with his ulcer. They could probably still be together if she had more patience with him. A person doesn't always have to have everything their own way. It just gets you worked up when what you really want is to just be happy. I guess Norma never learned to let go. But I'm not doing much better. Just because I didn't want to be alone last night, I'm

getting into deeper and deeper trouble. Hungover and about to throw up again, and so thirsty, and I can't even turn on the water or she'll hear me, and it's Christmas morning and I want to be home in my own bed where no one can hear me throw up. Or get as many drinks as I want. I could read, now my eyes are focusing okay, and fix myself something to eat. I'm really getting hungry. If only I hadn't gone down to the Pub. I'd be home. And Tom would be home where he promised he'd be and I'm standing in front of the bathroom door checking the lock by feel, when Norma just opens it and I'm in nothing but a towel and I know she's gonna know what we did.

"Sorry, honey," she says. "I just had to make sure. Listen, let me give you a piece of advice. Stay away from Tom, and his mother, and keep your insurance paid up. It'll maybe take a couple of months with you being so naive and eager to please, but keep your health insurance paid."

"I . . . ."

"And for God's sake don't get pregnant and figure that'll keep him home."

"But . . . ."

"Then you're gonna start blaming yourself. Well, honey, it's not your fault. He's a jerk. And that's all there is to that."

I don't know what to say to her. She's so hard and sure of what she thinks. I don't think I've ever been that sure of anything, to say those kinds of things like she's saying about Tom. I look at Tom, but he's putting his shirt on. And when he comes back over, he doesn't even look at me or wonder how I feel--I'm afraid of Norma and him both--

he just takes Norma by the shoulders and shoves her out the room and halfway down the hallway. I hear someone stumbling on the stairs and I hear them shouting about Christmas, his mother, the kids, her drinking, me naked, standing in the bathroom on the cold white tiles and nobody can miss them saying my name over and over and over. And I think to myself: Thank God my mother and father don't live here and aren't gonna hear this story.

When he comes back he drinks the rest of the Maalox, then the last of the little pint of cream. I have all my clothes on, including my coat and scarf--the scarf I brought to cover my hair last night because it was dirty and I didn't want to wash it, or fall down in the shower doing it. I still haven't washed it; there are only little soaps in the Atascadero Hotel bathroom and if I wash my hair with soap it'll leave a film.

He sits down on the bed, looking at the insulated drapes, like he could see through them to the outside.

I ask him, "Are you okay?"

"Take a shower, will you. I'll take you with me to my mother's and then we can go back to your car and I promise I'll buy you breakfast at the 'Spot,' and make sure you get home okay."

"Listen, Tom." My hands are shaking as I talk, probably from throwing up again, or from Norma, or his eyes. They're different now, like Norma's when she was yelling at him. "I don't think I want to go to your mother's or out to breakfast. I'll bet the 'Spot' isn't even open on Christmas. You know, I just think I want to go back to my car and I'll go home. Okay?"



He walks over to the nightstand and checks his Maalox bottle and cream container, pouring the last drops of each into his mouth and crushing the paper container. He drops it into the waste can.

"We'll only be at my mother's for a few minutes. I promise. We'll go in, play Santa Claus, and be off by ourselves."

"Tom, I don't want to play Santa Claus. I don't want to be around anyone's Christmas today."

"You get too involved in it, Claire. Just do it, and don't think about it and you'll be fine."

"I can't do that. I can't even go to a cheap monster movie without falling apart when the poor Japanese extras get stomped."

He laughs.

"You think I'm kidding? I took my kid brother to King Kong Versus Godzilla and he laughed through the whole thing. I had nightmares for a week."

"Tough up, kid. You're gonna spend your life with your head in the sand if you can't steel yourself against it once in a while."

"I know, but not today. Not Christmas. You know."

He sits down on the bed, his back resting on the metal headboard, and rubs his stomach. I feel sorry for him again, not afraid or angry. Just feeling like it's a small thing to go to his mother's today, if it would make him feel better.

"Only a few minutes, though," I say to him.

"I promise."

"Then we'll be off by ourselves?"

"Breakfast at the 'Spot' for my most beautiful girl. Now go

shower or my mother will be knocking on the door next."

"Your mother? How would she know to find you here?"

"Norma," he says, and with a sweep of his hand knocks the Maalox bottle into the garbage.

"Are you okay?"

"Take a shower, will you? I promised to take you to breakfast and I'll do it."

"But are you okay?"

"Please, Claire. Just take a shower and be quiet."

So I do. And after I'm out and dressing in front of the mirror he tells me about Norma. That he hated her fighting with him all the time. That he couldn't even stand to listen to other people fight now without his stomach aching like hell. He says he'll never do that again--never fight--no matter what it takes to stop it.

"I know what you mean. My parents always fought and I hated to listen to it. I hate to hear people fighting now."

"You don't know what it's like till you're married, not just listening to it from your own safe little room."

"I suppose you're right," I say, and don't tell him about all my fights with Katey and how angry I would get. But my stomach never burned like his, and I guess it's not the same after all.

He opens the fourth button on his shirt and lays his hand over his stomach. "Right here," he says, pointing to his middle, just below his breastbone. "The valve going from my esophagus to my stomach is all eaten away."

"Do you have any more Maalox in the car?"

"No, we need to get to my mother's. I have some more there," he says, and I think, okay, I can do this. It's only just for a few minutes and it's not like my Christmas or anything. I can just close my eyes and do it. Not get so damned empathetic that I start missing my family again so bad. I get another drink of water and rub my teeth as clean as I can on the wash cloth.

"Okay, I'm ready," I say, but I feel almost drunk again.

I help him unload the trunk and carry in the presents, all from Western Auto. Since the divorce he has no other credit cards, and no money. He even bought the wrapping there, even though it was twice as expensive and he knew it. There's a trike, two dolls and four games, several boxes I can't tell what's in, and a basketball. His mother greets us at the door.

"Tommy," she says and it's the first time I have heard him called that.

"Mom, this is Claire."

"How do you do, Mrs. Mathews," I say. It's a small entry in the back of the house, actually a room with a door on either end. On one side wall are coats on pegs about head high and I bump my shoulders on them worrying that if I knock them down Mrs. Mathews will think me clumsy. On the other wall is a washer and dryer and a pile of clothes. Primary colors roll around in the window--jeans, the kids' clothes, I think--and steam fills the little room.

"I called Norma this morning so she could wish her kids a Merry Christmas."

"She told me."

"Well, I couldn't wait around all day for her to call. Those little kids had to eat breakfast and get ready to go to church with Grandpa."

I lean on the dryer, barely able to keep my stomach down with the heat and the moisture, and the two of them talking in the little room. There's a faint smell of turkey cooking, beginning to mix with the steam from the washer and dryer. I feel like my face is sliding. There are two dolls on the washer and dryer and I concentrate on them to keep my stomach down. They have net skirts made of stiff netting that they sit in, and porcelain faces with red dots for lips and cheeks, and blue dots for eyes.

"And they don't stay clean very long, you know. I can't wait around for that Norma to call when they're going to church. Claire, is it?"

"Yes."

"Well, come in, come in. The kids have been waiting for you."

But they don't look up from their toys. There's an aluminum Christmas tree in the living room--not anything like ours would be-- and under it a revolving light with a four-color screen that makes the tree shine first yellow, then red, then blue and green. Like Niagara Falls at night and on post cards when I was a kid. Like summer vacation, not Christmas, I think, and relax a bit and then look around at the rest of the room.

The boy plays with the color screen, making it stay red, red, red, and the girl opens the new presents from Western Auto. The girl is four or five, with blond hair like her mother and dark brown eyes like Tom. The boy is the same, but has a long scar from the opening of his

left nostril to the inside of his mouth. His upper lip pooches out around the scar. Tom opens the refrigerator door and pours a glass of milk while his mother talks. He's not looking at any of us.

"So, now, where's your paycheck, Tommy?" she says.

"Oh, right," he says, and pulls the check from his back pocket and unfolds it and hands it to her.

Counting and adding, she goes through a large pile of bills: one hundred for the bank loan, twenty-five to Sears, forty to Conoco, seventy for the car payment, one hundred for child support, fifty to the Pub.

"You gotta do something about that, Tommy. It's not good for your stomach, getting drunk and staying out late."

She turns back to the pile. "And the rest of these. You only got seventy dollars left now, and you gotta pay a little on each one-- Western Auto, French's Hospital, the milk man. You owe it and you gotta pay a little each month, even just five dollars, so they know you're gonna do it. And especially Mark. He kept delivering milk so these little kids wouldn't starve when you and Norma had such a bad time last summer. He stuck his neck out for these kids. That comes first."

"You send them in. Okay, Ma?"

"That's what I always do, don't I?" she says, sliding everything into neat piles again. "You gonna stick around a little while, or you gonna take off again?"

"Well, I gotta take Claire home and get a little breakfast."

"Well, you can save a few bucks eating here. Claire won't mind."

She knows you don't have much money, don't she? You're not too good, are you, Tommy?" Suddenly she turns to me. "Claire?"

"I'd rather. . . ." I look at Tom, not knowing how to say no, wanting to say no, but it's his mother and he was the one who promised, after I agreed to come, so I shouldn't have to say anything. But he shrugs his shoulders.

"Claire?" she says again.

"I don't want to put you to any trouble, Mrs. Mathews."

"It's no trouble at all. You kids just make yourselves comfortable and I'll whip up some sausage and fried eggs."

"Tommy?" I say.

He doesn't look at me but turns around and goes into the laundry room again, leaving me in the living room watching the kids open their presents. Is this Leann? Do I dare say: What a nice dress, Leann? What if this is not his child at all, but the neighbor's girl? Why doesn't he come out and introduce us? Why doesn't he say hello, at least? I remember when my father came home when I was their age, I dropped everything and ran to see him. As soon as I heard his key in the door. This is different though. As Tom said, I have been afraid of new thoughts. There are other 'good' ways to do things. That's why I left home, to make my own decisions.

I settle back in the chair, waiting for Tom to come back. When he does, his mother stops him.

"There's your ironed shirts on the doorknob. You better take them down to the shack. I got too much to do up here."

"Tom!" I get up and follow him out to the laundry room. "Tom. I

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told you I don't want to stay here. Let's go to my place and I can fix breakfast."

"I can't." He lays the shirts over the dryer dolls' heads and takes my shoulders, leaning me into the wool and cotton coats. They close around my shoulders and his hands disappear.

"Come on, Tom. You know how I feel."

"Listen, Claire. Do it for me, okay?" he says, pressing his fingers into the soft flesh of my shoulders.

"Listen, Tom. I don't want to watch your kids open presents, or your mother cook a turkey. I want to be home in my own house. Just take me back to my car, would you?"

"You think I like this? I went into hock a hundred dollars to buy all this stuff. And I couldn't even buy what I wanted. I'm so goddamn broke from that goddamn divorce. All I could get . . . all I could buy was stuff at Western Auto."

"Tom. . . ." I want to say: it's not my fault, it's your fault. Your choice to get married, to buy all that stuff. But I remember his hand rubbing on his stomach. I have the power to make him hurt that much again, if I act like I did to Katey. But I have the power to make him not hurt, too, and I keep quiet.

"You don't want to cause a scene, do you?" His hands dig at my shoulders.

"Tommy, you're hurting me," I say, trying to move away from him, sideways. But he holds on tighter, his hands closer to my neck.

"Claire, you worry too much about yourself. Grow up. Start thinking about other people for a change." His lips are tight, his

eyes darker, straight lines stretching from his eyelids across his temples. I wish I was older, could move away from the wool scratching the back of my neck, his hands.

"I . . . ."

"Right, Claire. I, I, I!"

"I have the right. . . ."

"You don't even know what right is yet. You're just a naive, spoiled kid. Listen to me." He presses down harder on my shoulders and my skin burns under his hands. "Just do what I say this time, for me. Okay? What else do you have to do today? You'd just sit in your little house trailer all by yourself. And this is a lot better than nursing a bottle of Muscatel, right?"

"Yeah, but. . . ."

"Okay. That's settled, then." He loosens his grip, his hands move off my shoulders and down my upper arms. "Now go inside and sit down. I'll be back in a minute. I'm just going to put these shirts away in my room." He lets go of my arms and cradles my cheeks with his warm hands. "Claire, Claire. You're so sweet and good," he says, and kisses me on the forehead. "Go inside. I'll be right back."

I go in to the smell of sausage and turkey cooking. His mother breaks two eggs into the pan and smiles at me. "Go sit in the living room and put your feet up, Clara. You look tired."

I am. I'm too tired to even tell her she got my name wrong. Claire, it's Claire. The kids sit in a pile of wrapping paper bought on credit, especially for the occasion, and presents on credit. The kids rattle around in the pile and whisper, their cheeks reflecting



the colors, the red and green, blue and yellow.

When Tommy comes back he lays his hand on top of my head. His eyes are soft and sad, and he says, "I'm sorry. Tomorrow. We'll do it tomorrow, I promise." I nod my head and say, "Yes, yes," and drink the orange juice he sets down on the table beside me. I just hope I can keep it down.

## A SAFE PLACE TO BE

What do you remember, Claire?

It was early and we were all up there, Tom and me and his cousin, Karen, and her husband, Jim. They had already started down the dirt road and I was alone, standing by the door of the truck. We just left it there on the road. Then this elk jumped out of the bushes in front of me. It was enormous. The only thing I saw was its eyes. Big and open like moons staring at me. Tom came back, Why didn't you shoot it? Jesus Christ, Claire, you had the perfect shot, and you had that goddamn gun in your hand and you didn't even lift it to your shoulder. I don't know, I said. But he wouldn't stop. He said, Give me that gun. You don't even have the thing off safety. I don't understand you, woman. Look at this. He took the gun over where Karen and Jim were waiting, but Jim just said,

Well, I thought I saw some movement up the road a bit. Let's walk around and see if we can spot anything.

What did you do then? Do you remember?

I got in the truck and was going to wait for them to come back down the road.

What happened?

Tom was walking away and then he turned and saw me still in the truck. He waved for me to come.

Did you go then?

No. I still didn't want to. Tom came back to the truck. He had his gun slung over his shoulder, and he walked straight back to me. I was looking into the sun, you know, and it was just coming up over the hill, and it made that red hair of his look like angel hair or something.

What did he do?

He told me to get out of the truck. He said, Quit being foolish. I said, I'm not being foolish. I don't see any point being out there. I'm not going to kill anything. He said, Get out of that goddamn truck and don't give me any more of your lip. He gave me the lunch pack to carry, and said, At least carry the food, if you're not going to do anything useful today. He said it real mad and I could see his face now and knew what he was feeling.

Would you explain that?

What?

What you just said about how he felt.

Just all knotted up inside, you know. Like he felt trapped. That's why we never got married. We both hate that feeling of being tied down and this way if he's still here it's because he wants to be. Not because of some stupid piece of paper that makes him.

You never got married? But you live together, right?

Nine years. Since California.

California?

California, Colorado, Texas for six months. Montana.

Six months in Texas? Why?

A bunch of things. He got sick. I was hot all the time and really hard on him. Nothing worked.

Like?

He had this idea--we should buy a boat and go shrimping and make lots of money. But he didn't know how. And I didn't know how. First we didn't have enough money to keep the boat running, then gas money ran out, then rent.

You left after six months then?

One Saturday he got up real early and when he came back he had this little box all wrapped up in Christmas paper.

Was it Christmas?

No. It was just because we met on Christmas, and he always wrapped my presents with "Noel" written all over the paper or big Santa faces.

You opened it?

It was a little Greyhound bus--a matchbox bus with "Montana" on the little destination plate over the front window. He said, That's you and me sitting in the front of that bus, Claire. And I said, But what about the boat? Honey, he said, and laid two bus tickets in my lap, I'm sorry, but that's your boat.

He sold it to buy the bus tickets without discussing it with you?

He knew how I was. I'd start to panic and just start sleeping all the time. I'd feel like I couldn't fix anything and everything was always going to be bad.

Was that when he gave you the presents?

Yes. To make me feel better. He'd always figure things out and take care of me then. After he first got the present.

Okay. Okay. Ummm. About the accident then. Jim and Karen had walked down the road, Tom stopped and realized you weren't behind him.

Okay. We left the truck, right where I'd seen the elk. Tom and me, we caught up and then we all walked down to the next switchback. We waited to see if any more elk would come. But they never did. After eleven or so, Jim said he was hungry and would I mind passing the food pack to him so we all ate. Then I was cold just sitting there, doing nothing, so I went back to the truck to get warm.

Then did Tom and Karen and Jim go hunting again?

No. Tom was still mad at me. I left the food pack behind 'cause I thought the others might still be hungry. Tom called me just as I got back in the truck. You forgot your pack, he said, and yelled it loud enough so all the animals would sure as hell get out of that place.

Did that frighten you?

That was when he took my gun off safety.

He came back down the road to the truck again?

Yes. He brought the pack with him, and when he got to the truck, then he wanted me to carry the gun and not sit there. He held on to that yellow coat I was wearing and walked me back to the switchback. It was too tight under my arms the way he was holding it. But I didn't say anything.

Were Karen and Jim still there?

Yes. They waited till we caught up with them and then we walked up the road, all four of us. Karen and Jim walked on the left and me

and Tom walked on the edge of the road, on the right.

How were you walking?

Excuse me?

Who was in front?

I was. Me and Karen. I was walking in front of Tom and I was scared in case an elk stepped in front of me again. I wanted to be in back, so Tom'd have to shoot it, and I didn't want my gun off safety. And Karen told me it was okay if I didn't keep my finger on the trigger like Tom said

Then she spent some time showing you?

Just that morning at the house. And she watched me while we were walking. One time, after lunch, I got dirt up the barrel and she told me I could blow up the gun that way. I wished I didn't have to carry it at all.

How well did you know Karen? Was she your friend?

When we first came to Montana I thought she was. We stayed at her place at first. Then when Tom started looking for work, she took off a couple of days and showed me where the good places were to rent. We liked the same places. I wish we could've rented that house, but. . . .

Don't stop, Claire. What do you wish?

Oh . . . just . . . I could've made Tom a lot happier when we first got here. He was all worried about getting a job and I kept nagging him about that house. And I told Karen something about the fights we had then, I don't remember what, but it was when we moved into our apartment, the one Tom found on Spartan Drive. Tom liked it, but the carpets were all synthetic and slippery and one day I was bringing groceries in from the truck, I just slipped and fell down the

stairs. I told Karen that but she told her mother and her mother told Tom's mother and Tom came back to me and said he didn't care what that bitch of a cousin of his said, I wasn't to tell no one nothing that happened in our house. That was our business, he said.

She didn't believe you fell by accident?

I was angry with Karen after that. You know, if she couldn't keep a secret, I didn't want her telling things all over town.

You said you and Karen were looking at houses. But Tom found an apartment for you two to live in? Did he always decide where you'd live?

It's not important to me where I live. I have trouble with stairs but if I just take my time, and be more careful, I won't fall.

Did Tom give you a present when you moved into that apartment?

What do you mean?

Was it like Texas?

No, it wasn't like Texas. I was fine.

When you fell down the stairs then?

I told you Karen was wrong. It wasn't Tom. I fell. I'm clumsy sometimes.

Why did you want to keep sitting in the truck then? Did Tom think you were okay?

He thought I was fine. He still thinks I'm fine.

How do you know he thinks that? Did you ask him?

No! I haven't asked him.

Those presents on your nightstand--they're wrapped in Christmas paper, like the bus.

I'm fine. He always does that.

What does Karen think?

What are you trying to make out of this? You and that nurse in the emergency room. I suppose you've been talking to everyone.

You sounded like you liked Karen a lot when you were telling me about her watching over you. What if he shoots you again? Are you still not going to care what Karen thinks about you?

It's my fault. I had no business going up there with them. I mean you just don't move into Montana and become a native in five months. Know how to handle a gun and all. Tom and Karen grew up here. They knew the trouble I was having. That Karen can be pretty self-righteous sometimes.

Like with the stairs? What if Tom decides he needs to move again? Alaska, say, or Minnesota or Missouri or wherever. I think you do care what kind of house you live in and about setting roots and staying in one place. I think you're angry as hell and taking it out on Karen instead of Tom. Why can't you get mad at Tom? What's the worst thing that could happen?

Don't! Don't tell me how I feel. I know how I feel.

Then get out of this hospital and stand on your own two feet!

Look. Tom's my home and I'm going back to him no matter what any of you say or think. You don't know what I'm like to live with. So why don't you get off Tom's case.

You said you never got married.

You don't need a license to be married.

There's nothing keeping you there.



Love! Love, dammit!

So when did Tom get angry with you again?

He didn't get angry.

Well, then when did the argument happen?

For Christ's sake!

When, Claire?

Later. It started snowing and Jim kept talking about the clouds and Tom was thinking we'd all outvote him and want to go home because of the weather.

Is that what happened? Did you all outvote him?

No. But Karen and Jim were talking that way. Then I saw tracks on my side of the road. I'd been walking in them. I stopped and Tom came up right away. And right away there were more tracks, and nobody talked about going back. We came up to the next corner and went even slower thinking they may be just on the other side, but it wasn't until two more corners we saw them.

Did you shoot?

I was in front, Karen and me. And Tom started saying real low, Shoot dammit, shoot that goddamn gun, and kept saying that and when I realized Karen had her gun up I started to raise mine, and she got her shot off and I was okay.

She got it then.

Yes. She shot the one closest to us, and then started to aim at another, but they were gone too fast. No one else even got one shot off. Karen went over to the deer to make sure. And Jim put his gun down against a tree and got his knife out to gut the deer.

What was Tom doing? Why didn't he get a shot?

He was behind me all the time. Go help gut it, he said, but I didn't want to. There was blood all over the road. I turned away, and he said, Why the hell are you out here if you can't hack it? I said, I didn't want to be here. It was all your doing. He tried to make me turn around and watch. No, I said. I don't want to watch. I'm tired, and I wish I never came. Let go of me. I'm going back to the truck. I kept my eyes closed and I wouldn't watch and Tom kept hold of me.

Did you try to get away?

I started to. I turned my shoulders real fast, and got away from him a few inches.

What happened? Why didn't you move away out of his reach?

He got hold of my coat. He said, you're gonna watch, dammit. If you're gonna eat meat, you're gonna watch, and he turned me completely around by my shoulders, twisting that yellow coat up around under my arms and I couldn't hold onto the gun and it started to fall between us. Oh my God Tom, I said, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. But he shoved it away from us. He said, Oh you pitiful thing, you poor poor pitiful baby. Stand up, goddam it. And that would've been the end of it, but Karen, she had no business provoking Tom like that.

What did she say?

Stop, she yelled stop. She wanted Tom to let go of me. But that wouldn't work. That only makes him madder.

And what did Tom say?

It was me said it first. I said, Keep out of this, Karen. You got a big mouth and you should keep it to yourself.

And Tom?

He said just the same as me. He said, Keep out of this, but Karen wouldn't stop. So he let go of me and went toward her. He said, You keep butting your nose into what don't concern you, and he pushed her back a step. Then Tom said for me to come with him, but I wouldn't. No. I shook my head. I was away from him and I was gonna stay away. He was really mad then, and really flushed, his neck just as red as his hair, and came after me and hit me and I fell flat on my hands. It spun me around so I couldn't see him for a minute. I could hear him breathing and coming up just behind me. I saw Jim's knife drop and before I got back up, Jim got his gun. Stay right there, Tom, he said.

Did Tom stop then?

Well, yeah, of course.

What then?

It was snowing harder, then there was just this white dust all over the road.

And Tom?

He lost his hat and the snow was falling on him. It was cold and wet and started running into the sweat on his face.

What was he doing?

I don't know. Looking at Jim I guess. But he was pulling his handgun out of the holster.

He had a handgun?

He always had it when he was out in the woods. Jim said, Tom, I'll shoot you, but Tom kept on. He pulled the gun all the way out. Then Jim had the gun pointed and it went off.

Claire, Jim's gun wasn't fired.

Not Jim's gun. The handgun. Tom looked at Jim like he was going to shoot him, and I thought, I've got to stop him, I've got to do something, but he tripped and started to fall, and he turned around at me and the gun went off. There was blood on my hand and on my jacket. A circle on my jacket. I tried to wipe it away.

Why did he turn?

I don't know. I . . . maybe he was thinking of Jim and got confused or couldn't get his balance, I don't know why he was moving then, he was just standing there, no reason to turn. Jim was standing right in front of him. I remember it exactly as it happened. Tom said, Don't tell me what I can't do, it's none of your business. And Jim said, Don't, Tom, I don't want to shoot you.

Claire?

I must have said something wrong before. What did I say?

You mean about Jim?

I don't know, I don't know why he turned around. Did I say something?

Claire, you could ask him.

He's never done anything like that. It was an accident. That's all. It was an accident. He loves me. He got me slippers 'cause my feet get cold. He knows I'm always cold. And some magazines and my comb and brush. Here, look at this.

Yes. They're lovely.

They're slippers. I'll wear them when I go home and everything will be fine.